United Nations E/AC.51/2017/4

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
12 January 2017

Original: English

Committee for Programme and Coordination
Fifty-seventh session
Organizational session, 20 April 2017
Substantive session, 5-30 June 2017
Programme questions: evaluation

Evaluation of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) fosters comprehensive, equitable, integrated and sustainable development through effective economic and social cooperation in the region.

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) examined the relevance and effectiveness of ESCWA, focusing on how its three core functions — consensus-building, research and analysis and advisory services — support member States in the discussion, formulation and implementation of policy. The evaluation was conducted using surveys, interviews, on-site visits, direct observation, case studies, document reviews and secondary data analysis.

ESCWA has operated in an environment characterized by protracted conflict and political instability that has affected social dynamics in the region and posed several challenges to its work. Against that backdrop, the Commission has provided an important platform for building regional consensus and facilitating decision-making on global agenda items and thematic areas by providing an evidence-based, strategic and neutral platform for dialogue. While ESCWA has addressed the main priorities of its member States through its subsidiary body structure, it lacks a more systematic and regular approach to fully address newly emerging issues in the region.

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The Commission's knowledge generation, through its research and analysis work, has not been fully utilized to increase awareness of development in the region, owing primarily to deficient dissemination practices and feedback mechanisms. While discussions are ongoing to improve its publications programme, concrete strategies have yet to be implemented.

ESCWA advisory services have generally been well received, but their influence on policy has not been widespread. In addition, they have not been adequately linked with the Commission's other two core functions, research and analysis and consensus-building, to support policy formulation.

As member States focus on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ESCWA has played a key role in facilitating a regional position on the Sustainable Development Goals and on developing a strategy for moving forward in support of their implementation.

OIOS makes five important recommendations:

- Strengthen capacity to address newly emerging issues
- Develop and implement a comprehensive publications strategy
- Strengthen methodologies for collecting, analysing and reporting on programme performance
- Develop a detailed strategy and action plan for strengthening linkages between the Commission's three core functions
- Propose options for increasing the support provided to member States for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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I. Introduction and objective

1. The Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) identified the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) for evaluation on the basis of a risk assessment undertaken by OIOS to identify the programme evaluation priorities of the Secretariat. The Committee for Programme and Coordination selected the programme evaluation of ESCWA for consideration at its fifty-seventh session, to be held in June 2017.[1] The General Assembly endorsed that selection in its resolution 70/8.

2. The general frame of reference for OIOS is set out in General Assembly resolutions 48/218 B, 54/244 and 59/272, as well as in the Secretary-General's bulletin on the establishment of the Office (ST/SGB/273), which authorizes OIOS to initiate, carry out and report on any action that it considers necessary to fulfil its responsibilities. OIOS evaluation is provided for in the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation.[2]

3. The objective of the evaluation was to determine as systematically and objectively as possible the relevance and effectiveness of ESCWA. The evaluation topic emerged from a programme-level risk assessment, covers all substantive areas of the programme and is described in the evaluation inception paper.[3] The evaluation has been conducted in conformity with the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group.

4. The comments of ESCWA management on the draft report were sought and taken into account in the preparation of the final report. The formal ESCWA response is included in the annex.

II. Background

Mandate

5. ESCWA[4] was created by Economic and Social Council resolution 1818 (LV) and resolution 1985/69, by which the Council amended the Commission's terms of reference to emphasize its social functions. Furthermore, the Council, in its resolution 2005/50, requested ESCWA to provide support to member countries in realizing the Millennium Development Goals.

6. The Commission's mandate is to foster comprehensive, equitable, integrated and sustainable development through effective economic and social cooperation in the region. It assists member States in addressing policy weaknesses and enhancing capacities to address inequalities, and uses its convening power to provide a forum

[1] See A/70/16.

[2] See ST/SGB/2016/6, regulation 7.1.

[3] IED-15-003.

[4] In its resolution 321 (XXVIII), the Commission recommended that the Economic and Social Council redesignate the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia as the "Economic and Social Commission for Arab States", but that recommendation has yet to be endorsed by the General Assembly.

for member States to discuss and share views on regional economic, social and sustainable development issues. ESCWA pursues the following specific objectives:

(a) To support economic and social development in member States;

(b) To promote interaction and cooperation between member States;

(c) To encourage the exchange of experiences, best practices and lessons learned;

(d) To achieve regional integration and ensure interaction between Western Asia and other regions;

(e) To raise global awareness of the circumstances and needs of member States.

Governance

7. ESCWA is composed of 18 members,[5] with, most recently, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia becoming full members in 2012 and Mauritania in 2015. The Commission, through its ministerial session, meets once every two years, in even years.

8. Member States exercise corporate governance through their participation in the Commission. ESCWA management brings key issues to the attention of member States to facilitate the decision-making process, implement decisions and provide secretariat services to the Commission and its nine subsidiary bodies:

(a) Executive Committee (formerly Technical Committee);

(b) Statistical Committee;

(c) Committee on Social Development;

(d) Committee on Energy;

(e) Committee on Water Resources;

(f) Committee on Transport;

(g) Technical Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade, Economic Globalization and Financing for Development in the Countries of the ESCWA Region;

(h) Committee on Women;

(i) Committee on Technology for Development.

Management, organizational structure and resources

9. ESCWA is led by an Executive Secretary at the Under-Secretary-General level and is assisted by two Deputy Executive Secretaries, one for Programme and one for Programme Support.

[5] Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and the State of Palestine.

10. Table 1 shows that the Commission's total regular budget for the biennium 2014-2015 was $73.986 million. The Commission's extrabudgetary resources more than tripled from the biennium 2010-2011 to the biennium 2014-2015. ESCWA has 260 staff, including 119 in the Professional category. Its budget is broken down as follows:

(a) Policymaking organs, with $156,000, representing less than 1 per cent;

(b) Executive direction and management, with $4.376 million, representing 6 per cent;

(c) Programme of work, with $35.461 million, representing 51 per cent;

(d) Programme support, with $29.737 million, representing 43 per cent.

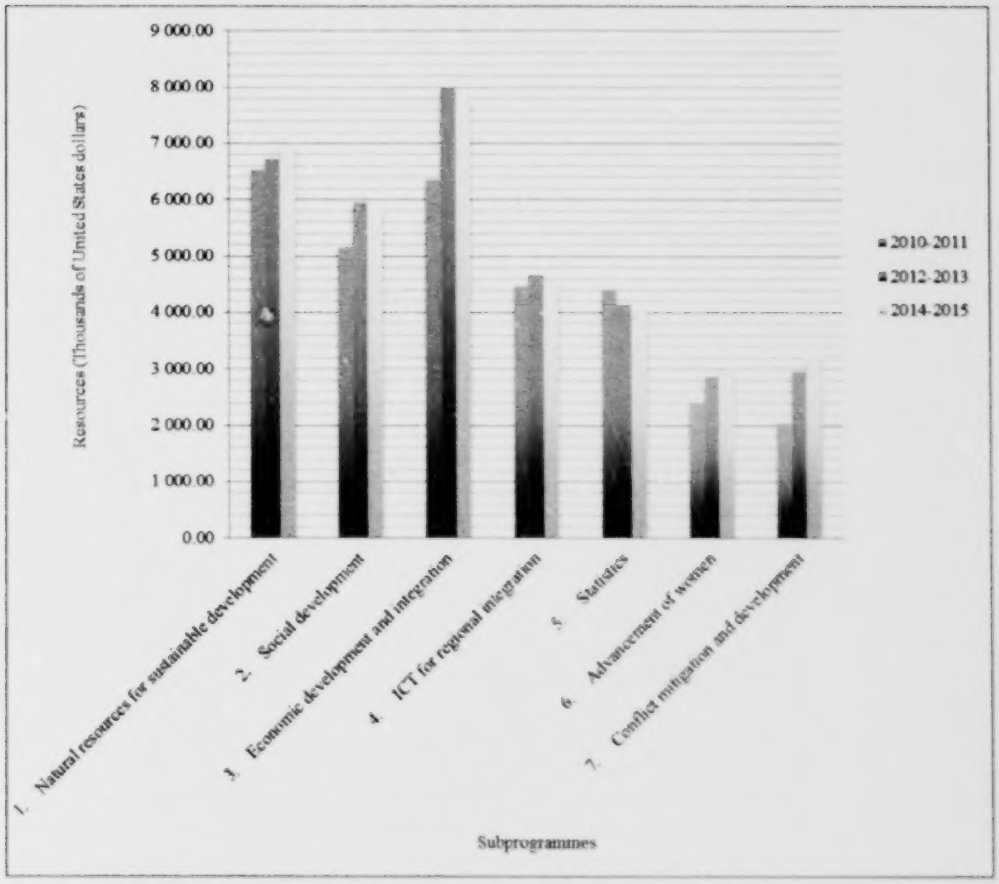
Table 1
Regular budget and extrabudgetary resources of the Commission, 2014-2015

	Resources (thousands of United States dollars)			*No. of posts*		
	2010-2011	*2012-2013*	*2014-2015*	*2010-2011*	*2012-2013*	*2014-2015*
Regular budget	64 409.2	69 177.9	73 986.9	261	264	260
Extrabudgetary	3 580.4	11 160.1	12 120.4	–	–	–
Total	**67 989.6**	**80 338.0**	**86 107.3**	**261**	**264**	**260**

Source: A/68/6 (Sect. 22) and ESCWA final appropriations report.

11. The Commission's programme of work is implemented by seven interdependent and complementary subprogrammes, which are shown in figure I together with their resource distribution during the period 2010-2015.

Figure I
Subprogramme and budget distribution of the Commission, 2010-2015



Source: A/68/6 (Sect. 22) and A/66/6 (Sect. 22).
Abbreviation: ICT, information and communications technology.

Core functions

12. The Commission's mandate is delivered through three interrelated core functions: (a) serving as a regional forum and consensus builder on regional and thematic development issues; (b) providing analysis, research and evidence-based policy alternatives; and (c) providing advisory services to facilitate the formulation, adoption and implementation of development policies. Figure II depicts how the three core functions are linked to influence regional policy.

Figure II
Functional linkages in support of the Commission's policy influence

Operational environment

13. ESCWA operates in an environment characterized by protracted conflict and political instability. Conflict situations currently exist in nearly half of the countries in the region, making it one of the most conflict-ridden in the world. By 2015, 37.5 per cent of the population in the region lived in a country affected by conflict or instability.[6] The political landscape of the region has experienced dramatic transformation in recent years. Since 2011, political uprisings in countries such as Egypt, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Yemen and other Arab countries have illustrated the demand for good governance and better economic and social conditions.[7]

14. Deteriorating security conditions have negatively affected the economies of the region. These include the developed economies of most Gulf Cooperation Council countries[8] and the economies of the countries of the Arab Mashreq[9] and the Arab Maghreb,[10] which include middle-income and least developed countries, as well as the economies of Arab least developed countries.[11] It is estimated that the average growth rate of the gross domestic product of the Arab region in real terms in 2014 was 1.5 per cent, a negligible change compared with 2013. The economies of Gulf Cooperation Council countries grew by approximately 4 per cent in 2014 and an estimated 3.4 per cent in 2015. However, the economies of the Arab Mashreq countries contracted by an average of about 0.6 per cent in 2014 and are estimated to have grown by only 1.2 per cent in 2015, while the economies of the Arab Maghreb countries, which contracted by 3.9 per cent in 2014, are estimated to have grown by only 1.2 per cent in 2015. According to available data for the fourth quarter of 2014, the unemployment rates for the State of Palestine stood at 26.5 per cent; for Egypt, at 12.9 per cent; for Jordan, at 12.3 per cent; for Saudi Arabia, at 11.6 per cent among Saudi nationals; and for Morocco, at 9.7 per cent.[12] A significant fall in oil prices has become an additional economic concern.[13]

[6] See E/ESCWA/2015/EC.2/4 (Part VII).
[7] See E/ESCWA/ECRI/2014/W.G.2/Report.
[8] Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
[9] Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the State of Palestine.
[10] Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.
[11] Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen.
[12] See E/ESCWA/EDID/2015/2/Summary.
[13] Ibid.

15. Intensifying armed conflict in the region has affected social dynamics, including through mass displacement. In 2014, there were 10.6 million refugees and 15.2 million internally displaced persons in the region. Those numbers have significantly increased in Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and the State of Palestine in recent years, causing humanitarian crises. Moreover, the scale of displacement has eroded human capital and hampered social development in the region. For example, social impacts are being increasingly felt in Jordan and Lebanon, where demographic structures have changed as a result of the influx of refugees and strained basic services.

III. Methodology

16. The evaluation examined how ESCWA has carried out its three core functions to support member States in the discussion, formulation and implementation of policy, and whether it is fit for purpose to support their implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It did not cover the Commission's programme of work relating to conference management services and administration.

17. The time frame for the evaluation was primarily the period 2012-2015. Selective data and information from earlier years were also reviewed to support the analysis of particular thematic issues.

18. The evaluation employed the following combination of methods for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data (all evaluation results are based on a triangulation of multiple data sources):

(a) **Interviews**: a total of 81 semi-structured interviews with ESCWA staff, member States and key stakeholders;

(b) **Missions**: to ESCWA headquarters in Beirut and to Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the State of Palestine. The missions included direct observation of two back-to-back intergovernmental processes;

(c) **Surveys**: web-based surveys of a non-random sample of ESCWA staff[14] and all ESCWA member States;[15]

(d) **Review of documents**: structured content analysis of key reports and documentation, including ESCWA strategic plans and financial documents; programme performance reports; minutes of meetings of senior management; reports and resolutions of the intergovernmental bodies; technical materials and publications; and press releases;

(e) **Secondary data analysis**: analysis of data from the Integrated Monitoring and Documentation Information System (IMDIS); social media such as Facebook and Twitter; and audit and evaluation reports;

[14] The staff survey was sent to a non-random sample of 193 staff, comprising all senior and Professional staff members and research assistants with substantive responsibilities. In total, 107 staff responded, for a 55 per cent response rate.

[15] The member State survey was sent to all 18 member States and was targeted at individuals at the ministerial level who had participated in the 2014 ministerial session. In total, five responded, for a 27.7 per cent response rate.

(f) **Analysis of intergovernmental decisions**;[16]

(g) **Case studies**: in-depth analysis of four thematic areas (social development, gender mainstreaming, national development planning and Sustainable Development Goals).[17]

19. The evaluation encountered a limitation in terms of the low rate of response to the member State survey, to which 5 of 18 member States responded.

IV. Evaluation results

A. The Commission has provided an important platform for building consensus and facilitating decision-making on global agenda items and thematic areas in a volatile region

The complex regional context has posed several challenges to the Commission's work

20. As highlighted in paragraphs 13 to 15 above, ESCWA has operated against a backdrop of protracted armed conflict and violence, increasing disruption of intraregional cooperation and a transition in some member States towards good governance. The complex regional context has had an impact on its work. The most frequently cited challenge to the Commission's overall effectiveness, cited both by staff surveyed (40 per cent) and by external stakeholders interviewed (22 per cent), was the conflict and political instability in the region. Conflict was seen as having a significant impact on the consensus-building work of ESCWA, since current security conditions in the region have limited the participation of member States in intergovernmental meetings, in particular those held at security-restricted duty stations such as Beirut. Conflict not only causes structural barriers to consensus-building in a regional setting, but also affects the ability of Governments to address policy issues on which ESCWA focuses. Restricted interactions with and responses from relevant counterparts in several countries, such as the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, have affected the type and the extent of the technical assistance and follow-up that ESCWA has been able to provide. The volatile situations in some countries have made it challenging to address development issues, since political and governance issues have been of higher priority.

The Commission's main comparative advantage has been its provision of a neutral, strategic and evidence-based platform for dialogue and consensus-building

21. ESCWA has played an important role in promoting dialogue and consensus in the region. Most external stakeholders interviewed (73 per cent) reported that the

[16] Decisions were assessed from the twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth sessions of the Commission and the three most recent sessions of the Committees on Energy, Water Resources, Liberalization of Foreign Trade, Transport, Statistics, Social Development and Women and the Executive Committee.

[17] Case studies were selected on the following criteria: subprogramme coverage; the relevance of the thematic area to the Commission's mandate; the extent of the advisory services provided; and the potential number of policy instruments influenced. Case study analyses were integrated into the evaluation results as an additional source of evidence.

Commission added value through its role as a regional platform for the exchange of ideas, bringing stakeholders together and building consensus on important development issues. Similarly, most staff surveyed (73 per cent) indicated that ESCWA was either very effective or effective in providing a forum for regional dialogue and the deliberation of key development policy issues in the Arab region. The Commission has played that role through the provision of evidence-based analysis at various intergovernmental deliberations and expert group meetings focused on gender, social development, statistics, water, energy, trade and transport issues. A recent example of the Commission's consensus-building role was the adoption by member States in 2014 of the Tunis Declaration on Social Justice in the Arab Region, which lays out a vision of social justice in the region and establishes commitments aimed at ensuring that progress is made in the achievement of sustainable development.

22. ESCWA has been able to play an important broker role in the region. Most government officials (20 of 22) and regional partners from the League of Arab States (6 of 6) interviewed noted that the Commission's neutral broker role had enabled it to promote dialogue and facilitate discussion both by incorporating a range of different perspectives into its analyses and by providing technical support for that discussion; they also noted that ESCWA was effective in facilitating regional and thematic forums in support of regional decision-making. In a survey conducted by ESCWA in 2015, most member States surveyed (85 per cent) gave it positive ratings for its technical servicing and contributions to the facilitation of intergovernmental meetings, both for the Commission's ministerial sessions and for its technical subsidiary committees.

23. ESCWA has contributed to the building of consensus and facilitated decision-making at three levels — global, regional and thematic — each of which is discussed in greater detail below.

The Commission has facilitated regional consensus on global agenda items

24. ESCWA has successfully facilitated the formulation of regional positions on a number of global development items, as demonstrated through the positive outcomes identified in table 2. In addition to promoting dialogue, it has achieved this by bringing specific issues to the discussion table and providing technical analyses, reports and presentations to inform the discussions in question. In addition to the Tunis Declaration on Social Justice for the Arab Region, referred to in paragraph 21 above, which was a significant achievement because it addressed social justice from a multisectoral perspective and illustrated the Commission's strategy of providing a vision of integrated development, ESCWA facilitated the adoption of other regional positions and agreements on global agenda items over the past four years. This enabled its member States to better articulate a common voice in global policymaking processes.

Table 2
Key regional positions and agreements on global agenda items facilitated by the Commission, 2012-2015

Facilitated the adoption of the Arab Ministerial Declaration on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which contributed to the discussions at the Conference (2012)
Facilitated a regional position on the Sustainable Development Goals and the post-2015 development agenda (2015)
Facilitated a regional position on the follow-up to the Beijing Declaration (2012)
Facilitated an Arab common position for the third International Conference on Financing for Development (2015)
Facilitated the adoption of the Cairo Declaration on the Post-2015 Development Agenda for Women (2015)
Supported the League of Arab States in crafting priority development goals that led efforts towards the adoption of the Arab Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development (2014)
Supported the Arab Ministerial Water Council in the preparation of its action plan to implement the Arab Strategy for Water Security in the Arab Region to Meet the Challenges and Future Needs for Sustainable Development 2010-2030 (2014)
Supported the development of the regional implementation strategy of the 2008 System of National Accounts (2012-2013)
Facilitated the declaration of the Council of Arab Ministers for Social Affairs on the post-2015 inclusive and sustainable development priorities of the Arab region (2014)

The Commission has also contributed to the adoption of key regional resolutions

25. Over the past three bienniums, ESCWA has supported member States in reaching regional consensus across nine sectoral areas, shown in table 3. Through their facilitation of the ministerial sessions held every two years, member States have adopted 20 resolutions to advance the economic, social and environmental development in the region.[18]

[18] There are no quantitative targets for number of resolutions against which to compare this number.

Table 3
Regional resolutions adopted at ministerial sessions facilitated by the Commission, 2010-2014

	Number of resolutions		
Ministerial session by sector	*Twenty-sixth session (2010)*	*Twenty-seventh session (2012)*	*Twenty-eighth session (2014)*
Social development	1	2	
Economic development	1	1	
Technology for development	1	1	1
Statistics	1		
Women	1		
Emerging conflict and related	1	1	1
Administrative and planning	4	5	5
Po ttical		1	
Sustainable development		1	1
Total	**10**	**12**	**8**

Source: E/2010/41, E/ESCWA/26/9/Report, E/2012/41, E/ESCWA/27/9/Report, E/2014/41 and E/ESCWA/28/9/Report.

26. In connection with the 20 resolutions referred to above, ESCWA has facilitated the adoption of 33 Commission decisions per year on average since 2010. Those decisions have been of four types: requests to ESCWA, agreements, recommendations and calls for member State action. Examples of requests to the Commission have included requests to follow up on successful public sector development initiatives in support of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and to prepare a report and assist member States in addressing the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. Examples of agreements have included the adoption of the statute of the ESCWA Technology Centre and the adoption of the ESCWA draft strategic framework. Examples of recommendations have included the recommendation that the Economic and Social Council redesignate ESCWA as the "Economic and Social Commission for Arab States". Examples of calls for member State action have included asking member States to participate in the sessions of the Arab High-level Forum on Sustainable Development and calling upon all member States to enhance coordination between national statistical offices to implement national strategies for statistical development.

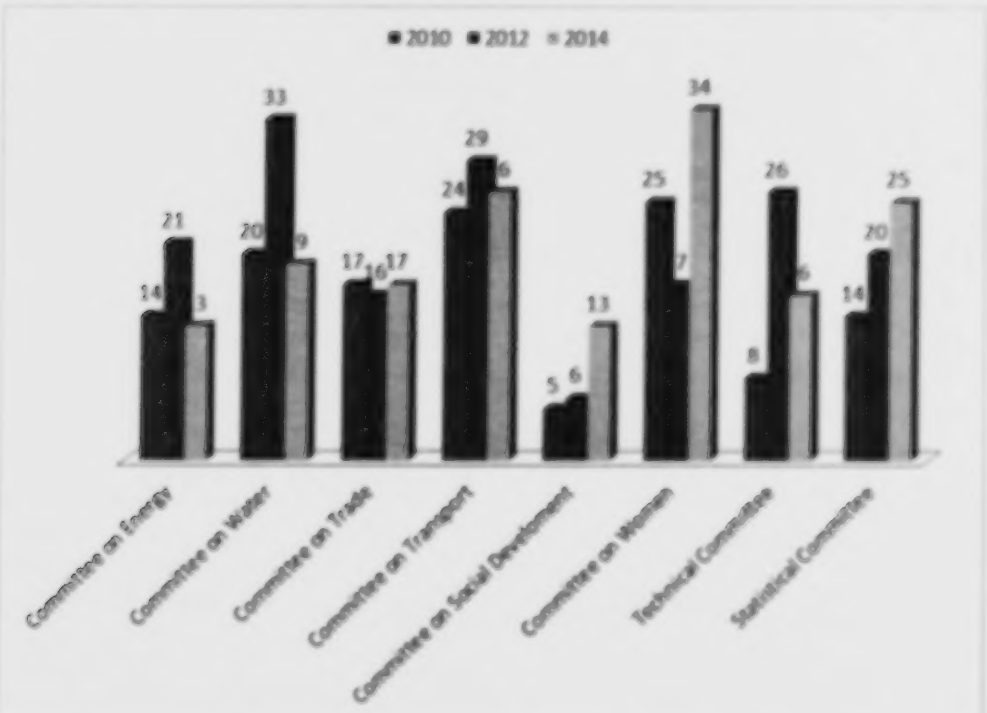
The Commission has also generated dialogue and facilitated decision-making across various thematic areas

27. As part of its overall consensus-building effort, ESCWA has promoted thematic debate through its subsidiary body structure. Whether in terms of statistics, gender, social development, foreign trade, transport, water or energy, ESCWA has played a catalytic role by bringing government officials together to exchange experiences and discuss relevant technical issues, challenges and policy options. Most member States interviewed (16 of 22) and all six partners from the League of Arab States

confirmed that they valued the Commission's thematic consensus-building work. Direct observation of recent meetings of the Committees on Liberalization of Foreign Trade and on Transport illustrated the Commission's effective facilitation of thematic decision-making through its presentation of supporting analyses and technical papers that guided debate and informed member State decisions. For example, government officials from two member States interviewed noted that improvements in road safety in the region had been due in part to the road safety measures discussed and adopted by the Committee on Transport.

28. Through its subsidiary structure of thematic committees, ESCWA has facilitated consensus in eight specific thematic clusters over the past three bienniums, as shown in figure III. With respect to the three sectoral areas for which specific performance measures have been established — water resources, energy and women — the number of decisions taken has exceeded the target. In total, ESCWA subsidiary bodies have taken some 458 decisions during this time period.

Figure III
Thematic decisions by subsidiary bodies facilitated by the Commission, 2010-2014



Source: Reports of ESCWA subsidiary bodies.

B. The Commission has addressed the main priorities of its member States, but lacks a systematic approach to fully address newly emerging issues in the region

The Commission's overall work programme responds to priorities as approved within its intergovernmental structure

29. Through the thematic subsidiary bodies highlighted above, technical counterparts in government ministries, in consultation with ESCWA, have consistently decided upon the Commission's proposed programme of work and a set of priorities for each thematic area. A review of the most recent deliberations of the subsidiary bodies shows that government officials have highlighted certain thematic areas and priorities within the Commission's mandate.

30. On average, 11 member States have participated in the discussions of the seven thematic committees over the past five years, which indicates fairly active participation by member States in the establishment of the Commission's priorities. A survey on the subsidiary committee deliberations conducted by ESCWA after each Committee session from 2012 to 2015 showed that 75 per cent of the government officials participating in the Committee meetings were largely satisfied with the discussions and relevance of the topics presented to them by ESCWA. The sessions included discussions on trade and transport; water management and energy issues; social development; gender; and statistics. The Commission subsequently endorsed all of the thematic priorities recommended in the Committees. Table 4 shows that member States have approved programmes of work for all subprogrammes through their subsidiary bodies over the past three bienniums, and indicates participation in the process by a good number of member States.

Table 4

Member State participation in the approval of thematic work programmes across the subsidiary bodies of the Commission, 2010-2014

	No. of member States			
Subsidiary body	*2010-2011*	*2012-2013*	*2014-2015*	*Thematic areas covered*
Statistical Committee	12	10	10	Multidimensional measurement of poverty; measurement of social justice; economic, social and environmental statistics; national accounts; Sustainable Development Goals; international comparison parity prices
Committee on Social Development	11	10	13	Social justice and equity; civil society and citizen participation; demographic shifting; youth; migration; ageing; employment and labour market; social cohesion; inclusive development; poverty; disability
Committee on Energy	14	11	12	Sustainable energy; natural resources management; energy efficiency; renewable energy; energy-food-water nexus
Committee on Water Resources	11	13	13	Integrated management of water resources; Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socioeconomic Vulnerability in the Arab Region; sustainable development; water management; water and sustainability; food security

Subsidiary body	No. of member States 2010-2011	2012-2013	2014-2015	Thematic areas covered
Committee on Transport	12	12	11	Transport and trade facilitation; international railways; transport logistics and efficient trade costs; infrastructure efficiency; road safety and integrated transport systems; sustainable transport
Committee on Liberalization of Foreign Trade	11	17	14	Private and public partnerships; trade policies; foreign trade; trade negotiations; economic globalization; financing for development
Committee on Women	12	13	14	Gender mainstreaming; gender violence; women's rights

Source: the past three sessions of each of the thematic subsidiary bodies.

In contrast to the Commission's regular approved work programme, emerging strategic issues have been addressed less systematically

31. ESCWA has received a number of requests to address emerging issues that were not initially planned in its programme of work. Owing to their unanticipated nature, ESCWA has identified them in an ad hoc manner. There have been programmatic and financial challenges to this approach, such as exploring further opportunities for replicability, identifying the resources required to deliver the support requested, and fitting the additional activities into an already approved work programme. Despite those challenges, ESCWA has been able to address some significant recent developments in the region through this demand-driven approach. For example, the Commission:

- Supported analysis for and the holding of high-level meetings to promote dialogue and discussion on issues stemming from the Arab Spring[19]
- Facilitated analysis of the implications of conflict for the macroeconomy and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in the Syrian Arab Republic and the preparation of a needs assessment report and facilitation of discussion on the National Agenda for the Future of Syria
- Initiated work to facilitate discussions in Yemen with regard to its current conflict and to identify reforms needed to move towards recovery and a sustainable development agenda for the future
- Supported requests for assistance in national development planning and the monitoring of indicators in Saudi Arabia
- Assisted Lebanon in the development of a preliminary vision and strengthening of national development planning capacities and initiated similar support for Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates on this topic.

32. In responding to newly emerging strategic issues and requests such as those discussed above, ESCWA has been hampered by the lack of a more strategic and systematic approach to discussing and following up on such demands for its support. Despite the critical importance of some of the new issues that ESCWA faces, such as national development planning, and although meetings of the

[19] E/ESCWA/EDGD/2013/WG.1/Report.

Executive Committee include discussions on regional and global priorities, the Commission has lacked a more dedicated approach to regular consultation and dialogue with member States on those issues, especially those that have regional relevance. Most of the Commission's senior leadership (at the D-1 level and above) interviewed noted that one of their major challenges was their limited flexibility in responding to new demands and requests of member States, especially in the context of a dynamic and rapidly changing regional environment. They noted that the ESCWA programme of work must be proposed and discussed almost four years in advance, leaving little room for responding to newly emerging priorities and requirements and no opportunity for continuous discussion and consultation with member States to decide on strategic options that might require more immediate attention and follow-up. In the absence of a more strategic and systematic approach to discussing and responding to unforeseen demands, ESCWA has not been able to maximize the value that it can provide to the region and leverage its unique regional mandate.

33. Member States have acknowledged this need, particularly in crisis situations. It was recognized by the Commission through the upgrading of an Emerging and Conflict-related Issues Division as well as through the establishment of a subsidiary committee on emerging issues and development in conflict settings by its resolutions 292 (XXVI) and 296 (XXVI). However, since the adoption of those resolutions, member States have decided that the work carried out by the Division on emerging and conflict-related issues is sufficient and therefore have eliminated the need for this specialized intergovernmental committee. Nevertheless, not all emerging issues are related to conflict, and most are addressed in an interdisciplinary manner through cross-cutting task forces whose work is funded mostly from other budgetary sources such as the regular programme of technical cooperation and the Development Account. In that regard, the establishment of the Division has not fully addressed the need to establish a more regular approach to consultation with member States on newly emerging issues of potential relevance to the e ntire region.

C. The Commission's research and analysis have not been fully utilized to increase knowledge about critical development issues

Knowledge generation and promotion, a key component of the Commission's mandate, has been hindered by deficient dissemination practices and feedback mechanisms

34. One of the Commission's main objectives is to provide "a home for expertise and knowledge" on social and economic development issues facing the region. Accordingly, significant amounts of human and financial resources are dedicated to its research and analysis activities that generate knowledge, primarily through its publications programme. During the biennium 2014-2015, more than 72 per cent of the Commission's outputs were recurrent and non-recurrent publications, technical materials and related expert group meetings.[20] Similarly, nearly 75 per cent of its total staff work-months were dedicated to producing knowledge.[21]

[20] The remaining 28 per cent were dedicated to capacity-building and advisory services.

[21] The remaining 25 per cent were related to advisory services and capacity-building.

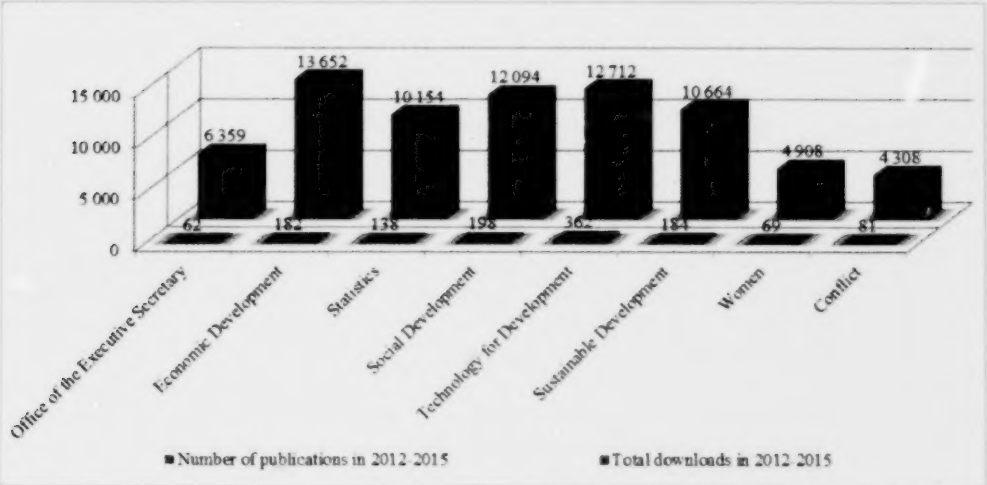
35. Dissemination practices with respect to ESCWA publications have not been as effective as they could be owing to the lack of a planning and outreach strategy for targeting readers. An analysis of ESCWA publication concept notes[22] produced during the biennium 2013-2014 showed that explicit dissemination goals were not required and did not exist for most ESCWA knowledge products. The distribution of these products has not been strategic, and data on actual report distribution are inconsistent; rather, dissemination lists have been managed by each individual division and have varied in size and content. Therefore, the total targeted number and type of readers intended for each product is unknown across the Commission. On a more ad hoc basis, some publications, such as the *Arab Governance Report* and the *Status of Arab Women Report*, have been presented at expert group meetings for dissemination and awareness-raising. However, this practice is not systematic and there are insufficient data to determine its effectiveness in enhancing the utility of the publications. In prior years, ESCWA developed a readership survey to enable users to provide feedback on publications both electronically and in print, but it is no longer used, and no data were available from previous surveys.

36. Staff and external stakeholders interviewed have mixed views regarding awareness of ESCWA publications. One third of external stakeholders interviewed stated that they were unfamiliar with the Commission's publications. Just over half of staff survey respondents (57 per cent) stated that ESCWA was effective in promoting awareness of important national development issues through its research and analysis work, while 27 per cent were neutral and the remaining 13 per cent rated the Commission as ineffective in that regard.

37. As they are only a proxy measure of use, particularly in a region where Internet access may limit the electronic availability of publications, the download data presented in figure IV provide little clarity regarding the extent to which the knowledge produced by ESCWA is used by its intended beneficiaries. In 2014, the most downloaded publication was its main flagship document, the *Arab Integration Report*, which received 1,433 downloads. Other 2014 flagship reports, such as the *Arab Millennium Development Goals Report*, *An Arab Perspective on the Post-2015 Agenda* and *Summary of the Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region* received only approximately 300 downloads each, which suggests that more can be done to maximize the utility of these key publications. Moreover, in 2012, 51 per cent of all ESCWA knowledge products downloaded received no more than 10 downloads, including 97 that received only 1 download.

[22] Outlines approved by the publications committee.

Figure IV
Commission publications and downloads by subprogramme, 1 January 2012 to 31 October 2015



38. As shown in table 5, ESCWA has been less active in leveraging social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter, to increase its visibility and promote greater awareness of its work compared with other regional organizations. ESCWA does not have specific strategies, targets or benchmarks for social media outlets, and programme managers rarely use such data to inform publication outreach and dissemination strategies.

Table 5
Media outlet data as at 7 January 2015

Organization	*Facebook "likes"*	*Tweets*	*Twitter followers*
ESCWA	5 111	1 388	700
World Bank — Middle East and North Africa region	1 044 334	7 247	7 936
League of Arab States	6 266	3 218	1 246

Discussions are ongoing to improve the Commission's publications programme, but this reform has not been fully implemented

39. The ESCWA publications committee is currently reviewing the Commission's overall publications programme and processes in order to reform the publications programme. Part of the reform initiative has involved the development of the following recommendations, none of which has been fully implemented:

- Approve the suggested list of readership indicators
- Undertake the external review of publications

- Implement a communications plan
- Revamp the website as a portal associated with Google Scholar
- E-publish in different formats
- Have a clear strategy for adding publications to social websites
- Add ESCWA bulletins to Arab development journals and citation databases.

40. While these internal efforts are intended to improve the publications programme, and initiatives have also been planned to address issues such as publication quality and internal coordination, the ongoing reform has not fully addressed the lack of a dissemination strategy and of user feedback mechanisms. It is also unclear whether the reform effort will involve consultation with targeted users such as member States, members of academia and civil society and other stakeholders with a view to more comprehensive reform.

D. While the Commission's advisory services have generally been well received, their influence on policy in the region has not been widespread

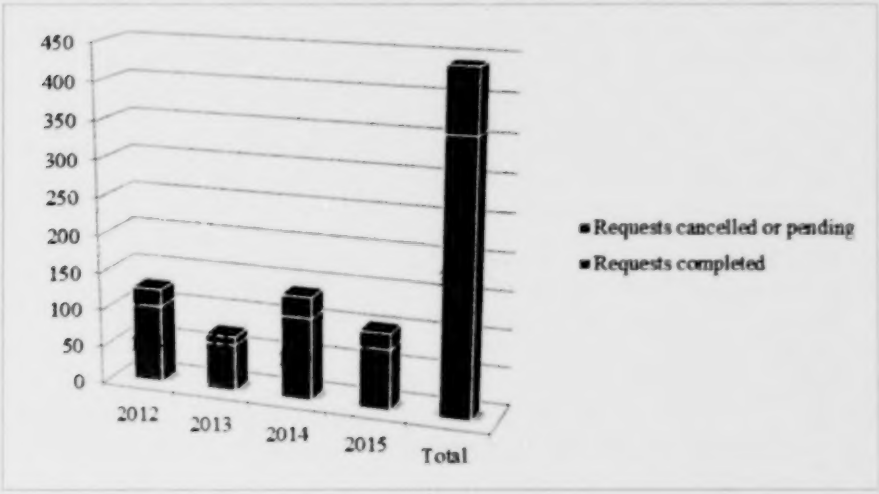
ESCWA advisory services have been acknowledged as high-quality

41. The Commission's advisory services accounted for 33 per cent of its expected results and related indicators of achievement during the biennium 2014-2015. Over the past three years, all acknowledgement letters that ESCWA received for its advisory services (20 in total, from six countries and one regional organization) highlighted appreciation for its work, with half specifically mentioning appreciation for advisory support with respect to policy advice. In those letters, member States referred to specific examples of helpful policy advice in such areas as multidimensional poverty indexing, national development planning, gender mainstreaming, social protection, national accounts, information and communications technology strategies and the green economy. All five respondents to a member State survey conducted by ESCWA to assess its advisory services indicated that high-quality service had been delivered.

42. Currently, requests for advisory services with respect to policy support are primarily demand-driven. During the period 2012-2015, a total of 441 requests were made by member States for advisory services, as shown in figure V. Of those 441 requests, more than half (241)[23] were for policy advice and support, with the highest number being in the areas of economic development, technology and innovation and statistics. Seventeen per cent of those were not carried out owing to transfer to another United Nations entity, postponement until 2016, security concerns, non-issuance of visas or insufficient recipient follow-up.

[23] The remaining 200 requests were for capacity-building or research.

Figure V
Policy support requests by Commission subprogramme, 2012-2015



Source: ESCWA programme data.

While the Commission has contributed to some policies in the region, this influence has not been extensive

43. During the biennium 2014-2015, ESCWA contributed to actual items of draft legislation and policies across various sectors in 13 countries, as shown in table 6, primarily through the provision of advisory services. For example, the Commission provided technical advice and facilitated the creation of a water management system and strategy and developed, in collaboration with national counterparts, a national development plan that included goals and indicators as well as a monitoring system (dashboard) to track them.

Table 6
Commission contributions to member State policies, 2014-2015

Member State(s)	*Subprogramme*	*Policy area*
State of Palestine	Sustainable development	Water policy
	Social development	Gender sensitivity
United Arab Emirates		Youth policy
Sudan		Integrated social policy
Saudi Arabia	Economic development	National development planning
Lebanon		Macroeconomic policy
Egypt and Jordan		Public-private partnership

Member State(s)	*Subprogramme*	*Policy area*
Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia	Technology for development	E-commerce legislation
Egypt		Communications technology policy
Saudi Arabia	Statistics	National accounts
Yemen	Women	Gender equality
Iraq		Gender-based violence
Yemen	Conflict	National dialogue

Source: Programme performance report, technical cooperation report, interviews and case studies.

44. Notwithstanding the examples set out in table 6, however, ESCWA staff and member States provided mixed assessments of the Commission's policy influence in the region. None of the five member State survey respondents rated ESCWA effective in supporting policy formulation, stating that they did not know whether it had been successful in that regard. Government officials interviewed from four member States stated that they could see no influence of the Commission's work on policy formulation in the region. A majority of the Commission's staff (59 per cent) rated its policy influence in the region more positively, although the remaining 41 per cent did not have a positive view of that influence and noted that more could be done to maximize it.

45. External stakeholders cited a lack of awareness about ESCWA advisory services as a challenge that limited policy influence. Four senior government officials from two member States visited on mission expressed their desire for ESCWA technical advisory services, including advice on statistics, gender mainstreaming and water management, but did not know how to obtain them.

The Commission has helped to build member State capacity, but the links between capacity-building and policy changes are unclear

46. ESCWA has made a number of positive contributions with respect to building the capacity of its member States. During the biennium 20104-2015, it successfully delivered on all expected accomplishments related to capacity-building, through 69 workshops. Some external stakeholders interviewed cited successful examples of ESCWA capacity-building activities and stated that they had increased the skills and knowledge of technical officers in national Governments; examples included training in the areas of climate change, economic development, national accounts, information technology, disability, addressing violence against women, and road safety. Most staff survey respondents (73 per cent) expressed the view that the Commission's technical assistance had helped member States in the region to better respond to their own economic and social development policy needs.

47. Despite the assumption that improved capacity leads to improved policy formulation, however, ESCWA has been unable to clearly demonstrate that link. The Commission's programme performance report for the biennium 2014-2015, as

reported in IMDIS as at 31 January 2016, contained at least five examples of reported results related to policy influence across subprogrammes that showed an unclear connection between its capacity-building activities and its policy influence in the region. The example shown in table 7, cited in the Commission's programme performance report for 2014-2015, illustrates this weak connection, lack of specificity with regard to actual policies influenced and lack of systematic reporting on the contributions to actual policies and strategies developed. Whereas the indicator of achievement refers to the number of policies, plans and strategies adopted, the actual results reported refer to training and capacity-building but do not address the actual number of policies adopted.

Table 7
Example of Commission programme performance reporting demonstrating an inadequate connection between capacity-building and policy influence

Expected accomplishment: Enhanced capacities of member countries to develop and implement national, subregional and regional policies, strategies and action plans for the sustainable management of water, energy and land

Indicator of achievement: Increased number of policies, plans and strategies adopted by relevant ministries in member countries addressing water, energy and land needs

Result: Through capacity-building support from ESCWA, Yemeni officials were trained on appropriate mechanisms to promote investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency projects, and thus were enabled to adopt a strategy on financing renewable energy systems and expressed a willingness to do so in the future. Therefore, ESCWA support helped to increase indicator b (i) by one strategy

Source: Partial programme performance report entries as reported by 31 January 2016.

E. The Commission has not adequately linked its three core functions to support policy formulation

48. The links and complementarities between the three core functions of ESCWA — consensus-building, research and analysis, and advisory services — which should work together to support its objectives, are difficult to discern. While the Commission's support for policy formulation is one of its key cross-cutting goals, the three core functions, while individually important, are not sufficiently integrated to achieve that goal.[24] First, the knowledge generated through its research and analysis is not sufficiently disseminated and promoted so that it can increase awareness and be used to better inform the decision-making of member States. Second, there is no clear strategy to guide its advisory services in effectively responding to and facilitating the implementation of decisions and agreements reached through its consensus-building and intergovernmental processes. Third, there is inconsistent follow-up after advisory services are rendered to integrate any

[24] See A/69/6 (Prog. 19).

new knowledge gained into the Commission's research and analysis and consensus-building functions.

49. The Commission's resources specifically devoted to regional expertise are rather limited; it currently has six regional advisers. Those advisers have not been able to consistently attend the meetings of the subsidiary bodies in order to better tailor technical support to the issues on which they focus. While ESCWA research and analysis outputs are often produced without the full benefit of the experience and knowledge gained by the advisers when working with member States, regular staff are also increasingly delivering technical assistance.

50. As indicated in paragraph 48 above, the Commission's core functions of consensus-building, research and analysis and advisory services are not fully integrated to support its overall mandate; however, it is currently taking steps to strengthen those linkages. This is being done primarily through a reconceptualization of its work programme to align itself with the three strategic pillars of inclusive development, regional integration, and good governance and resilience. In doing so, ESCWA is also attempting to address the challenge of divisional silos and promote interdivisional collaboration. While this focus on three pillars is aimed at supporting cross-functional complementarity, it also adds an additional layer of coordination to the Commission's work. This reconceptualization is also being implemented in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and therefore is still evolving.

F. The Commission has taken preliminary steps to respond to member States' demand for follow-up and support on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

The Commission played a key role in facilitating a regional position on the Goals

51. As noted previously, ESCWA played a significant role in facilitating the process of regional consultation, prioritization and consensus-building carried out prior to the global negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2014, following the initial provision of support for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, ESCWA launched the Arab High-level Forum on Sustainable Development. The Forum provided a platform for discussing the regional sustainable development priorities that informed and shaped the ministerial declarations and positions on the post-2015 development agenda. At the same time, ESCWA initiated discussions with member States through its subsidiary committees, as well as with other United Nations organizations, on the steps needed to ensure the implementation of and follow-up to the Sustainable Development Goals. At the twenty-first meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism, held in November 2015, it was agreed that ESCWA would chair the thematic working group on the Sustainable Development Goals at the level of United Nations regional directors, as well as the Task Force on Statistics.[25]

[25] See E/ESCWA/OES/2015/RCM.21.

Member States have expressed an increased demand for regional coordination and support for implementation, monitoring and reporting on progress with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals

52. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, member States have been engaged in identifying effective ways to integrate and adapt their institutional structures, align their plans and strengthen their capacities to roll out its implementation and monitoring. On mission, eight government officials (from four countries) indicated that they were particularly interested in receiving further assistance in sectoral areas such as planning, statistics, social development, water and transport. It is clear that in this regard, ESCWA can provide relevant expertise and support in critical thematic areas that are at the core of the Sustainable Development Goals. While technical ministries have not received any specific communications from the Commission's technical counterparts, last November ESCWA presented its Executive Committee with a strategy and plan of action[26] that sets out approaches, priorities and details with regard to how it intends to support countries in their implementation of the Goals. The strategy and plan of action was endorsed by the Executive Committee in December 2015. Moving forward, it will need to be translated into concrete action plans that provide options for supporting member States in meeting their planning and implementation needs.

V. Conclusion

53. Despite working in a complex environment under political and security constraints, ESCWA has been able to play an important catalytic role in sparking dialogue and debate on the critical issues facing its member States. It has facilitated consensus in important areas, such as governance, gender and social justice, which have advanced progress in the region and set the stage for continuing growth and development. Its particular comparative advantage of providing a neutral, strategic and evidence-based platform for reflecting and deciding upon often challenging topics has been well utilized in facilitating the adoption of decisions and agreements that unify the region in terms of a common goal of sustainable development.

54. In the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ESCWA will be called upon to play a central role in supporting member States in their efforts to implement and monitor the Sustainable Development Goals. Its regional mandate and technical expertise are well aligned with the key needs of its member States for support. Whether it be adapting national development plans, strengthening national statistical capacities, promoting social development or trade issues, or championing regional cooperation, ESCWA is well positioned to provide the type of assistance that its member States will need to be successful in making the transition from conflict and unrest to political, economic and social stability.

55. In its efforts to accompany the region in that transition, ESCWA will need to strengthen its role as a think tank, regional forum and adviser. In particular, it will need to strengthen its overall work programme, moving further away from subprogramme silos and closer to a more integrated approach that effectively links

[26] E/ESCWA/2015/EC.2/4 (Part 1).

its three core functions. While those three functions are important inputs for policy formulation, more is required in order to influence policy. ESCWA will need to provide a full range of policy tools and options and help to build policy networks to strengthen regional institutional frameworks for policymaking. Given its resource constraints, ESCWA will also need to better leverage partnerships with other United Nations entities, as well as civil society, for a more comprehensive strategy for supporting its member States. Its ability to ensure that information is exchanged and lessons are learned will also be critical to optimizing its role in that regard.

56. The Commission's Sustainable Development Goals strategy and action plan are positive steps in the right direction in terms of being responsive to the needs of its member States for support in implementing the Goals. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a critical opportunity for ESCWA to reflect on its achievements, identify gaps where it can improve its performance, and strengthen its capacity to bridge global and national priorities through its unique regional role, expertise and perspective.

VI. Recommendations

57. OIOS makes five important recommendations to ESCWA, as set out below.

Recommendation 1 (result B)

58. **ESCWA should strengthen its capacity to address newly emerging priority issues in the region and unplanned requests for support by creating a means for more regular and systematic dialogue and consultation with member States, including through the Executive Committee.**

Indicator of achievement: Discussion of emerging issues at sessions of the Executive Committee or other intergovernmental body

Recommendation 2 (result C)

59. **ESCWA should implement the recommendations resulting from its current publications reform and further strengthen the utility of its publications by developing and implementing a comprehensive publications strategy that includes guidelines on dissemination, communication and advocacy as well as performance indicators and feedback mechanisms to regularly track progress, including targets on clientele and distribution.**

Indicator of achievement: Recommendations from reform implemented and publication strategy document with target dates for implementation of each component

Recommendation 3 (result D)

60. **ESCWA should strengthen its methodologies for collecting, analysing and reporting on programme performance data in order to better address the longer-term outcomes of its three core functions, and to more effectively demonstrate the linkage between them.**

Indicator of achievement: Enhanced programme performance system with clear methodologies and data collection tools

Recommendation 4 (result E)

61. **ESCWA should develop a detailed strategy and action plan for strengthening the linkages between its three core functions of consensus-building, research and analysis, and advisory services. The action plan should clearly define activities, time frames, authority and accountability for the steps to be taken to enhance these linkages. It should be developed with consideration given to the already developed ESCWA strategy on the Sustainable Development Goals.**

Indicator of achievement: Action plan with follow-up mechanism for all functional areas

Recommendation 5 (result F)

62. **ESCWA should further enhance its capacity to implement the Sustainable Development Goals strategy by proposing options to increase the support provided to member States on mainstreaming, implementing and monitoring the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in national development planning processes. In implementing this recommendation, consideration should be given to establishing dedicated capacity and resources for supporting the Sustainable Development Goals.**

Indicator of achievement: Options on strengthening member State capacity to implement the Sustainable Development Goals at the regional and national levels, including through national development plans

(*Signed*) Heidi **Mendoza**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services
March 2017

Annex

Formal comments provided by the Commission

The Office for Internal Oversight Services presents below the full text of the comments received from the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on the evaluation of the Commission. This practice has been instituted in line with General Assembly resolution 64/263, following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee.

Comments of the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on the evaluation of the Commission

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) thanks the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) for the opportunity to provide comments on the report on the above-referenced evaluation. ESCWA recognizes the importance of this evaluation and extends its appreciation to OIOS for its detailed findings and recommendations.

ESCWA welcomes the report's recognition of the key strengths and challenges faced by the institution. Among the key strengths that the report cites are: the Commission's strategic efforts in facilitating regional consensus and initiating debate on global and regional priority issues; the Commission's substantive engagement on issues of regional concern, in particular for countries in transition; and the Commission's active engagement with member States regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and support for the work of member States on the Sustainable Development Goals.

ESCWA has reviewed the report carefully and welcomes its findings and recommendations, which encourage greater performance monitoring and reporting for long-term results, along with the implementation of a comprehensive publications strategy and the expansion of its strategic partnerships. To that end, ESCWA is preparing a detailed action plan, both building on work already under way and forming task teams reporting to senior management to draft additional action plans and standard operating procedures in response to these recommendations.

ESCWA is in agreement with the recommendations contained in the report and would like to add the following observations:

Recommendation 1

The Arab region has faced a growing number of emerging issues in recent years, including, but not limited to, conflict and instability, forced migration, rising poverty and inequality, environmental degradation and unemployment (especially among youth and women). ESCWA agrees with this recommendation and is committed to facilitating ongoing dialogue and consultations on these and other new and emerging priority issues with all its member States through its intergovernmental bodies, including its Executive Committee, its multi-stakeholder forums and other regional platforms.

Recommendation 2

As a normative organization dedicated to regional knowledge production, ESCWA considers its publications to be the cornerstone of its work. ESCWA is in agreement with this recommendation and has already begun embarking upon the development of a publications strategy and plan of action.

Recommendation 3

ESCWA agrees with this recommendation, particularly on the importance of capturing and reporting on the longer-term results of its normative work. In that regard, ESCWA has revised the scope of work of its monitoring function and is actively reviewing options for adopting the best-suited programme performance system that meets the needs of the Commission.

Recommendation 4

ESCWA views its three core functions of consensus-building, research and analysis, and advisory services as mutually reinforcing and integral to the delivery of its mandate. ESCWA agrees with this recommendation and will be acting accordingly in its planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities, building on the efforts already acknowledged in the evaluation report to further strengthen the linkages between its three core functions.

Recommendation 5

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are integral to the development of the Arab region and to the Commission's mandate, and ESCWA fully agrees with this recommendation. ESCWA has assigned dedicated staff to support regional and national efforts on the 2030 Agenda and will continue to expand upon its provision of unique services related to the achievement of the Goals.

In conclusion, ESCWA would like to thank OIOS for this comprehensive evaluation report. As it reflects on strategies and modalities for further sharpening its outputs and services, ESCWA will benefit from the findings and recommendations presented in the report. ESCWA will continue to ensure that its three core functions are mutually reinforcing and that they capitalize on its strategic value in support of member States in the achievement of the goals of the new sustainable development agenda.